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ABSTRACT

The leading frame-of-reference theories make opposing predictions about the effects of message discrepancy on attitude change. Assimilation-contrast theory predicts that messages that are highly discrepant with initial attitudes are likely to produce less attitude change than messages that are mildly discrepant. In contrast, perspective theory predicts that highly discrepant messages will extend subjects' attitudinal frame of reference (perspective) and thereby produce greater attitude change. The theory was tested by having subjects state their attitudes toward a target issue and, 30 days later, read a persuasive message that was either highly or mildly discrepant with their initial attitudes. Results indicate that the highly discrepant message produced changes in subjects' attitudes whereas the mildly discrepant message did not. In general, the results are consistent with perspective theory and inconsistent with assimilation-contrast theory. The latter may overestimate the closed-mindedness of subjects who are exposed to highly discrepant information. (Author)

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Social Judgement Theory Versus Perspective Theory: The Effects of Message Discrepancy on Attitude Change

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Social Judgement Theory Versus Perspective Theory:

The Effects of Message Discrepancy on Attitude Change

One of the more compelling problems in the attitude change area is the issue of application. The clinician and/or the advocate want and need to know some basic practical procedures for getting people to alter their attitudes. One group of approaches involves exposing individuals to discrepant information. Clearly, if one wishes to influence someone's stand regarding an attitude object, one has to expose them to positions discrepant from his/her own. But what kind of tactic should be used? Should the target be exposed to a position similar to his/her own, or rather, to a position that is strikingly different?

In the present paper we will consider two traditional Social Psychological theories that are relevant to message discrepancy. Each argues for one of the two tactics just mentioned. Both are frame of reference theories--that is, both assume that attitudes are continuums. Both assume that an understanding of an individual's <u>particular</u> stand necessarily involves understanding how that person views the alternative positions available.

Consider the first theory, Sherif and Hovland's (1961) Social Judgement theory. According to Sherif and Hovland, a person's stand on an attitude issue consists not only of one "most acceptable position," but also of a range of positions close to the most acceptable position which the person also finds acceptable. As positions become increasingly discrepant from one's most acceptable position, they begin to become objectionable. Then, one enters a range of progressively unacceptable positions. The range of <u>acceptable</u> positions is called the Latitude of Acceptance; the range of progressively <u>unacceptable</u> positions is called the Latitude of Rejection.

These latitudes define certain key cognitive distortion processes. If a person receives information that advocates a position similar to his/her own (within his/her Latitude of Acceptance), s/he will perceive that information as less extreme than it is--which is to say s/he assimilates the information. If the information is highly discrepant, it will be contrasted--that is seen as more discrepant than it is; and it is likely to be evaluated unfavorably, positive influence is less likely, and a "boomerang" effect of negative influence is possible.

Sherif and Hovland (1961) also have an ego-involvement dimension in their model, i.e., the personal importance of the attitude issue for the judge. When an issue is highly ego-involving, the judge's Latitude of Acceptance will be narrow, and the Latitude of Rejection wide; with issues low in ego-involvement, the Latitude of Acceptance will be wide and the Latitude of Rejection narrow. Simply stated, this means that the more important an issue is, the less likely a judge is to be influenced by positions other than those close to his/her own.

In sum, a message is likely to be effective only if it falls within the Latitude of Acceptance. If it does, it will be assimilated and seen as close to one's own position. On the other hand, messages outside the Latitude of Acceptance are less likely to be effective, and may even be rejected outright, as they are contrasted away from one's own position. A message should be most effective when it falls around the upper bound of the Latitude of Acceptance. In Figure 1, we have plotted this point of maximum effectiveness--it is the first star, moving from left to right along the curve.

The second theory mentioned above is Ostrom and Upshaw's (1968) Perspective theory. Essentially, Ostrom and Upshaw define the attitude continuum in the same way as Sherif and Hovland--as alternative positions.

There are 3 key concepts in the perspective model. First, Content which is roughly equivalent to "most acceptable position" in Sherif and Hovland. Second is Self-rating, which is the judgemental language a person uses to describe his or her content (pro-anti, favorable-unfavorable, etc.). Finally, there is the range of content alternatives the person considers in making a judgement, or his/her Perspecitve. A person's perspective is defined by what he/she considers the most positive and negative positions plausible (called the upper and lower perspective end anchors).

Thus, perspective theory takes into account two kinds of attitudes about the same attitude object. There is first a specific position (i.e., content). The second "attitude" is the evaluative label for one's content position (self-rating). According to Ostrom and Upshaw, when a person turns to evaluative language to label his/her content, s/he takes into account his/her perspective--in other words, self-rating is determined by content evaluated in the context of one's perspective. If cars range in price from $1000 to $8000 and I buy one at $2000, I may label myself as cheap; if I buy a $7000 model, I might call myself reasonably extravagant.

Content, self-rating, and perspective are dynamically related. A change in one may produce changes in the other two. A change in one attitudinal construct with a second held constant can produce a rather precise and dramatic change in the third. Consider only that change relevant to the present discussion. Presentation of discrepant messages is a Perspective manipulation. A mildly discrepant message will not change the reference scale (perspective) used to evaluate content, and there should, therefore, be no change in either content or self-rating. But, an extreme message that lies beyond the upper Perspective end anchor extends one's perspective, starting the dynamics of the model. Figure 2 illustrates

the kinds of changes we might expect with an extension of an upper perspective end anchor. Moreover, an example from Ostrom's (1970) work may help clarify. In Ostrom's research, subjects were presented a case history of a man accused of phoning a bomb threat in to a hospital. They were asked to state their content positions on the case in terms of a recommended jail sentence, and to note their own favorability (feelings) toward a long jail term for this type of offense. When subsequently told that the actual range of sentences available to a real judge was very wide, subjects would typically rate themselves as more unfavorable toward extreme sentences, (i.e., a change in self-rating), and change their content positions toward longer sentences (a change in content).

The difference between the two theories is clear, and we have tried to point out this difference in the dotted line from Figure 1 to Figure 2. Sherif and Hovland's Social Judgment theory predicts maximum attitude change with <u>mildly discrepant</u> messages. Ostrom and Upshaw's Perspective theory predicts maximum attitude change with <u>highly discrepant</u> messages

Our study was designed to test the differing predictions of the two models with an ego-involving issue: the likelihood of a textbook price increase.

Method

Two hundred Ss were pretested. Their contents, self-ratings, Upper Perspective end anchors, upper bound of their Latitudes of Acceptance and Lower bound of their Latitudes of Rejection were assessed. These were in terms of a dollars and cents increase in the price of a $10 book (except for the self-rating item). We have briefly paraphrased the measures in Figure 3. These items were embedded with other demographic and opinion items as part of a larger questionnaire.

Approximately 3 weeks later, we selected a follow-up group of 40 subjects. These subjects were selected specifically for the relative homogeneity of their responses to the Latitude of Acceptance and Latitude of Rejection items ($\underline{M}$ = \$2.20; $\underline{M}$ = \$2.70 respectively). This allowed us to tailor our persuasive messages so that in all cases, the mildly discrepant messages fell very near (but inside) the upper bound of subjects' Latitudes of Acceptance, while the highly discrepant message always fell well beyond the lower bound of their Latitudes of Rejection.

Subjects were recruited for an experiment on short-term memory. Some aspects of short-term memory (STM) were explained to them, and they were told of the need to study STM for meaningful material (rather than nonsense syllables, lists of digits, and so on).

Subjects were given 5 minutes to read a transcript of a talk supposedly given by the head librarian at midwestern university. The librarian in addressing the board of regents, described the financial hardships that he has had to undergo, including layoffs, loss of ability to make and maintain purchases, and so on. To support his argument, the librarian cited increases in printing, binding, materials, and other expenses. These costs, he noted, may have to be passed on the students who would have to make purchases of books the library would not be able to supply. For half the subjects, cost increases were put in terms of a 20% increase (or \$2 on the price of a \$10 book). For the other half, all the figures in the passage were in terms of a 40% increase (or \$4 in the price of a \$10 book). Again, note that the \$2 figure was within, but close to, the upper bound of the mean Latitude of Acceptance; the \$4 figure was well beyond the mean lower bound of Subjects' Latitude of Rejection.

Subjects were then given a "memory test," i.e., a simple recognition test on aspects of the passage.

Crossed with the discrepancy manipulation was a commitment manipulation. Half the subjects were asked to write 2-3 reasons why an increase they might think of in the price of a $10 book would be positive. The other half were given a dummy task involving the recognition of publisher's names. By committing half the subjects to their initial self-ratings, we hoped to "freeze" self-ratings, resulting in more dramatic content shifts.

After reading either the highly discrepant or less discrepant message, Ss were given disguised versions of the pretest measures.

Results and Disucssion

The results are summarized in Table 1. Analyses of Variance were performed on all measures: a 2 x 2 x 2 (discrepancy x commitment x sessions), the last factor being a repeated measures factor. As Table 1 suggests, there were no significant effects due to commitment, nor did commitment interact significantly with other variables, for any measure. However, there was a significant effect for discrepancy on all measures, as well as significant discrepancy x sessions interactions.

In essence, all measures in the high discrepancy condition shifted in the direction of the message. The mildly discrepant message produced no significant changes. Notice the last column of Table 1. Perspective theory predicts that subjects exposed to a wider range of prices (that is led to anticipate a large price increase) should actually become less favorable in their feelings about price increases. Our results show the opposite pattern; subjects in the high discrepancy condition became significantly more favorable toward an increase.

In general, the results of this experiment are consistent with predictions derived from the perspective model of attitudes and inconsistent with those originating from assimilation-contrast theory. There is no support for the assimilation-contrast prediction that highly discrepant messages

which fall far beyond the lower limits of one's latitude of rejection will be contrasted and/or rejected. In fact, persuasive messages appear to be more effective at altering opinions when the attempt to persuade occurs in large rather than small steps.

The perspective model makes the prediction that an extension of subjects' upper perspective end anchors should result in greater changes in attitude content among those respondents who are committed to their initial self-ratings. Presumably, such a commitment would result in greater changes in attitude content because self-ratings would be resistant to change. The data for attitude content were not consistent with this hypothesis. However, the failure to confirm the "commitment" hypothesis may be less attributable to a deficiency in theory than to an inadequate commitment manipulation, for the self-ratings of subjects assigned to the high commitment condition were no less resistant to change than were the self-ratings of subjects in the low commitment condition.

The one outcome that is <u>not</u> consistent with perspective theory was the tendency of subjects in the high discrepancy condition to rate themselves more favorably disposed toward textbook price increases after reading the persuasive message. However, our view is that parallel changes on self-ratings and attitude content represent a qualified disconfirmation of the perspective model similar in scope to that reported by Kinder, Smith, and Gerard (1976). Kinder et al. surveyed a group of university students to determine their political attitudes and activities, (political content), the political climates of their home and school milieus (political perspective), and their ratings of self on a political liberalism-conservatism scale (political self-ratings). When they controlled for (i.e., partialed) the influence of attitude content, Kinder et al. found a <u>positive</u> relationship between self-ratings and perspective rather than the inverse relationship

anticipated by the perspective model. The investigators explained this result by noting that the target attitudes in their field study were ego-involving and deeply rooted (i.e., embedded) in subjects' past experiences, whereas target attitudes employed in previous laboratory tests of perspective theory (e.g., Ostrom & Upshaw, 1968; Ostrom, 1970) were not. Their contention is that changes in perspective, content, or self-rating will produce parallel changes in one of both of the remaining constructs if the attitude under consideration is highly embedded in past experiences. In other words, past experiences that define the subject's attitude embeddedness serve as markers or "reality constraints" that link specific "contents" to particular "ratings" and hence, induce parallel shifts in content, rating, and perspective. For issues low in embeddedness, subjects have few if any past experiences to link a particular attitude content to a particular rating. In the absence of these emotionally involving experiences, a change in content, rating, or perspective will merely direct subjects' attention to the three elements of the model encouraging them to "solve" their relationship on a purely cognitive level. As a result, subjects may then "derive" the logical perspective model "solution" whereby changes in one construct (e.g., perspective) will result in a situation where the remaining two constructs shift in opposite directions (e.g., an increase in attitude content and a decrease in self-rating).

Although we made no attempt to measure the embeddedness of our target attitude, it is likely that these attitudes were highly embedded. The topic of cost increases for textbooks and other educational materials had been the subject of debate and the stimulus for student protest in the term preceding the experiment. Moreover, college students buy textbooks on a regular basis and may often spend a relatively large percentage of their limited resources at the bookstore counter. If we are correct in assuming

that our target attitude was of high embeddedness, then the parallel changes observed for perspective, attitude content, and self-ratings are consistent with the revision of perspective theory proposed by Kinder et al. (1976).

To conclude, our data offer no support for the notion that attitude change is most likely to occur when persuasive attempts are modest in scope. Indeed, assimilation-contrast theory cannot account for the fact that mildly discrepant messages which fell very near the upper boundries of subjects' "latitudes of acceptance" did not affect attitudinal judgments, while highly discrepant messages that fell well within subjects' "latitudes of rejection" produced significant changes in the direction advocated for all attitudinal measures. Although the highly discrepant message described a set of circumstances that subjects could not initially have accepted, reasonable arguments were presented to back the message's conclusions, and the message was undoubtedly perceived as credible in this age of rapidly escalating prices for consumer foods. Perhaps it can be argued that assimilation-contrast theory overestimates the closed-mindedness of subjects who are exposed to highly discrepant information. The present results indicate that such information presented in a logical and factual discourse will not invariably be rejected and, in fact, is likely to broaden the subject's attitudinal horizons in the manner specified by perspective theory

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Table 1

Mean Ratings of Attitude Content, Self-ratings, Perspective, Latitude of Acceptance and Latitude of Rejection for Subjects in Each Experimental Condition

Experimental conditions		Attitude content		Upper perspective end anchor		Latitude of acceptance		Latitude of rejection		Self-rating	
Discrepancy	Commitment	Session I	Session II	Session I	Session II	Session I	Session II	Session I	Session II	Session I	Session II
High	High	$1.23	$1.83	$2.55	$3.65	$2.18	$2.95	$2.80	$3.65	2.90	3.70
	Low	$1.13	$1.88	$2.68	$3.68	$2.10	$3.00	$2.78	$3.75	2.90	3.90
Low	High	$1.35	$1.23	$2.73	$2.68	$2.32	$2.10	$2.87	$2.60	3.10	3.10
	Low	$1.25	$1.23	$2.75	$2.65	$2.22	$2.38	$2.67	$2.73	3.40	3.10
Significant Results		b		a, e		c, d		c, e		c	

Note. N = 10 per cell

[a]significant Discrepancy main effect, $p < .05$

[b]significant Discrepancy main effect, $p < .005$

[c]significant Discrepancy x Sessions interaction, $p < .01$

[d]significant Discrepancy x Sessions interaction, $p < .005$

[e]significant Discrepancy x Sessions interaction, $p < .001$

Figure 1: Predictions Derived from Social Judgement Theory

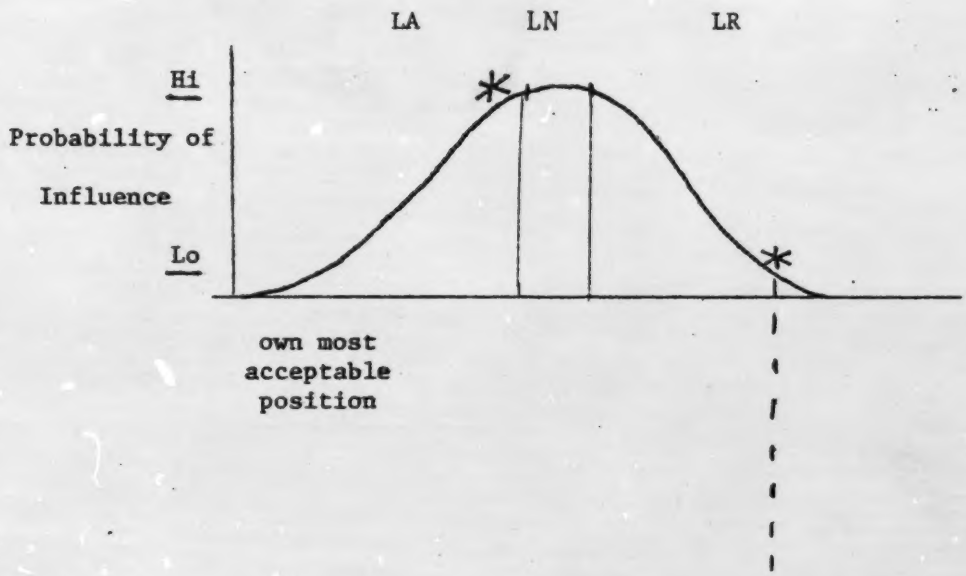

Figure 2: Predictions Derived from Perspective Theory

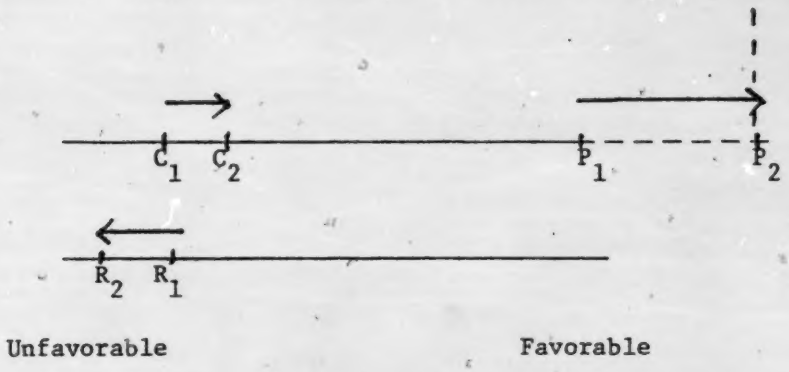

Figure 3: Summary of Dependent Measures

Attitude Content (C): . . . amount of increase in the price of a $10 book that you consider reasonable.

Self-Rating (R): . . . how do you feel about a possible increase in book prices? (1 = extremely unfavorable, 9 = extremely favorable)

Latitude of Acceptance (LA): . . . maximum increase in the price of a $10 book that you could possibly accept (even if slightly more than a reasonable increase).

Latitude of Rejection (LR): . . . minimum increase in the price of a $10 text you would find absolutely unacceptable.

Upper Perspective End Anchor (P): What do you believe is the maximum increase in the price of a $10 book that publishers could actually ask for?